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FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 2026



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## Cleanup of Gainesville hazardous waste site continues to stall

*Remediation on the 140-acre site has spanned three decades*

By **Kylie Williams**

March 4, 2024 | 9:00am EST



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When Robert Pearce bought his home in Gainesville's Stephen Foster neighborhood, he didn't know he was moving next door to a hazardous waste site. The 71-year-old resident began investigating what he'd heard about nearby contamination after moving into his home in 2008.

"I started to get unhappy, and then I got involved," he said.

Pearce had moved into a home only a couple of miles away from the Cabot Koppers Superfund site at 200 NW 23rd Ave., an area the Environmental Protection Agency designated as containing large amounts of toxic waste.


Since the 1990s, the companies responsible for the cleanup have been working to remove contaminants from the site and the surrounding Stephen Foster neighborhood. The hazardous chemicals from the site have raised concerns for Pearce and other residents, who worry about potential risks to human and environmental health. The future of the site is also in question, as remedial efforts are extending years longer than originally planned.

The superfund site contains two properties: a charcoal and pine tar plant previously owned by Cabot Carbon, and a wood treatment facility operated by Koppers Inc. Activity at the site began in the early 1900s and lasted almost a century, with Koppers being the last to end operation in 2010.



During the facilities' operation, harmful chemicals like arsenic and lead seeped into the air and soil. Neither company practiced proper wastewater management, and contaminated sludge was released into unlined ponds, which leached into the nearby Hogtown and Springstead Creeks.

Pollutants drained into the sediment of the creeks, killing off nearly all ecological life and posing a risk for any residents coming into contact with the water. When Pearce moved into his home, which sits next to Springstead Creek, he noticed the water's neglect.

Once Pearce learned about the site, he began to push for proper stormwater management and complete remediation. He went door to door to speak to residents, and put together presentations for the Gainesville City Commission and the EPA. 

"You kind of have to be the squeaky wheel to get things done," he said.

Cabot completed its remedial efforts in 2020, and the cleanup at the Koppers site was in progress. Yet the remediation at Koppers is still ongoing due to a disagreement between Beazer, known as Koppers — and the Florida Department of Transportation. For years, the two entities have argued over how to relocate a drainage ditch that empties into Springstead Creek.





Discussions surrounding the relocation are still in progress, Beazer East President Michael Slenska said. Beazer East is hoping to finalize the relocation plans this year, he said, and finish the construction of it by 2025.

However, there is still no estimated end date for the total completion of the site's cleanup. Remediation cost over \$50 million, and Slenska said Beazer East has no current plans to develop or sell the site once cleanup is complete.

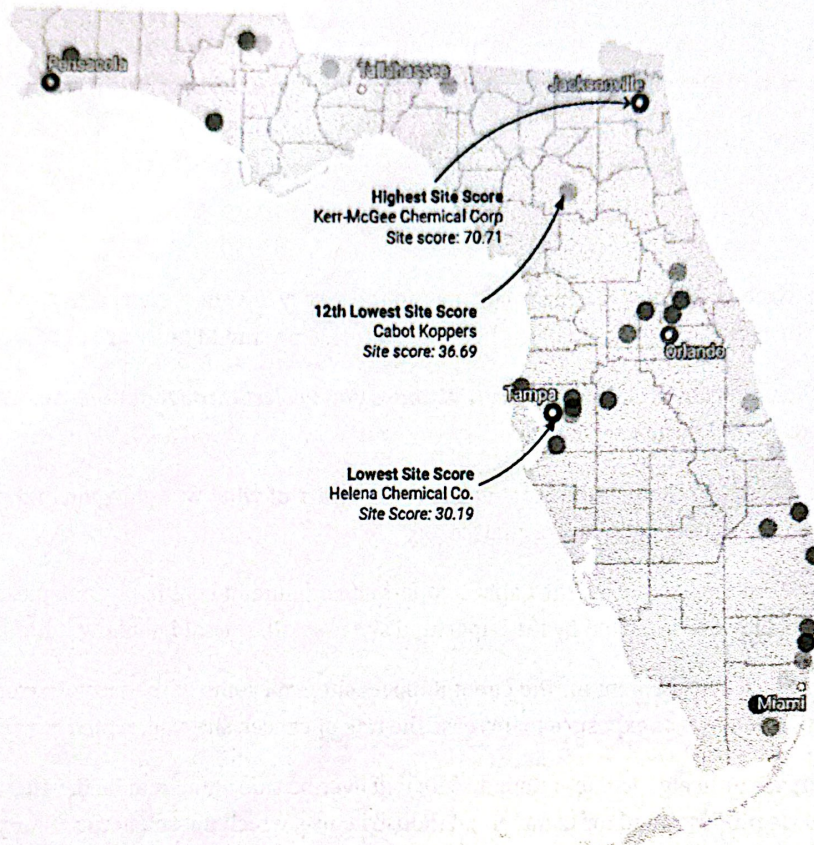
"For the past 30 years... we have been operating a groundwater treatment system at that location," Slenska said. "So our expenditures go back many decades."

### Cabot Koppers among Safer Superfund Sites in Florida

Locations of all 52 Florida superfund sites on the National Priority List for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Site Score

30 71



Site score is based on Hazard Ranking System and scores of pathways like ground water, surface water, soil exposure and air migration. Locations with scores under 28.50 are removed off the National Priority List and are designated as "No Further Remedial Action Planned."

Map: Diego Perdomo • Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

From 2009 to 2014, Cabot Carbon and Beazer East tested and removed contaminated soil from homes in the Stephen Foster neighborhood. Heather Hushelpeck, a resident of the Stephen Foster neighborhood, has a home that borders the Koppers site.


Hushelpeck, 50, had the top two feet of soil on her property removed and replaced. At least 100 other homes underwent similar remediation after high levels of arsenic and other contaminants were found in the soil.

She was less worried about her soil and more concerned with chemicals leaching into the Koppers site sits above the Floridan aquifer, which supplies water to thousands of Gaines

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us,





Testing from the early 2000s showed contamination from the site had leaked into the Floridan aquifer, Gainesville Regional Utilities engineer Rick Hutton said. GRU's wellfield, which draws water from the aquifer to supply to the city, is less than four miles from the Cabot Koppers site. Hutton said the aquifer's contamination raised concerns that the city's water could be tainted.

GRU has been monitoring the wellfield in case of contamination, Hutton said, but thus far the city's water hasn't been tainted. Even after remedial efforts are complete, the aquifer will still have to be watched for potential pollution, he said.

"With these big contamination sites, you have to monitor them forever," Hutton said. "Just to make sure that something unexpected isn't happening."

Gina Hawkins, a 64-year-old former resident of Stephen Fosters, can still recall walking down Second Street in the 1980s and seeing a cloud of dust rolling off the Koppers site. The dust was a common sight for residents while Cabot and Koppers were active, Hawkins said.

The dust contained chemicals such as chromium, copper and arsenic. Exposure to these chemicals can lead to health problems such as liver failure and lung cancer, according to the National Library of Medicine.

After a 2011 study, the Alachua County Health Department found a very low increased cancer risk from dust in Stephen Foster homes. Even if the risk is minimal, Hawkins believes all residents should be aware of what's in their backyard.

Hawkins worked for the nonprofit organization Clean Water Action Project throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s to educate citizens and advocate for the site's cleanup.


"That was the point of our whole campaign was to make people aware of what was going on and what they were being exposed to," Hawkins said. "So they could make choices too."

It can be difficult to measure the impacts of the Cabot Koppers site on human health, physiological sciences UF Professor Leah Stuchal said. The sample of people affected by the Superfund site is small, she said, making it hard to draw conclusions.


Stuchal, who conducted a risk assessment for the Cabot Koppers site, said some of the most dangerous impacts may take decades to show up. It takes years of exposure to increase the risk of cancer, she said, which is a concern for experts.

Even after remediation, it's unlikely the Cabot Koppers site will ever be safe enough to be developed into a residential area, Stuchal said. The site's cleanup is zoned for commercial industrial use, which doesn't account for people with compromised immune systems, she added.

"If you're going to fix it to residential standards, now you've got people of all kinds of different health status," she said. "And that's definitely going to need higher protection levels."

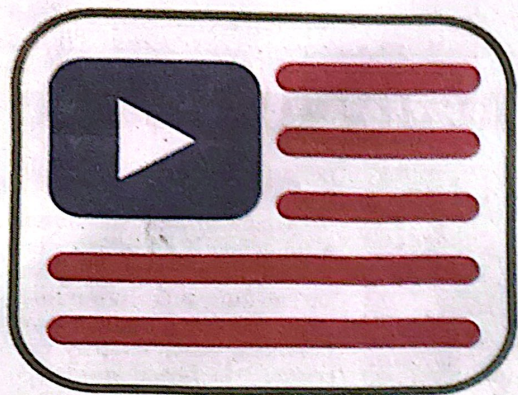
In the decades since remediation began, some residents of Stephen Fosters have expressed a desire for the city to develop the Cabot Koppers site into a park or event center. 

While proposals have been made, Gainesville won't pursue development until Beazer East Commissioner Bryan Eastman said. The site's zoning would have to be changed, and negotiations with the site's owners would have to be pursued, he said.

In the future, Eastman hopes the site can be developed into a recreational place or protected area. Hawthorne Trail bumps up against the Cabot Koppers site, Eastman said he'd like to see the trail catch up to the site in the future. 

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## GRU Authority approves consultants for \$55 million project

**State agency  
would require the  
changes by 2032**

**By Seth Johnson**  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU) Authority approved to hire a contractor for an estimated \$55 million project at the Murphree Water Treatment Plant on Jan. 14, the only drinking water facility for the city and some surrounding areas.

The GRU Authority also

heard an update on a \$150 million loan the utility will need to take on this year.

Debbie Daugherty, GRU's water and wastewater officer, said the upgrades would expand water storage capacity, alleviate operational constraints and fulfill the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) policy.

Daugherty said FDEP would require the utility to make these changes by 2032. She said any large facility projects take years to plan and then construct.

This project could also

include a new, standalone pumping station and interconnect the water piping at the site to ensure redundancy and that no single failure could shut down the whole operation.

The Murphree Water Treatment Plant was built in 1975, and the water pumps are still the originals, Daugherty said.

Daugherty said the exact scope will depend on planning and design with its contractor. GRU staff recommended entering a contract with Overland Contracting, Inc., and the GRU Authority

approved the recommendation.

GRU staff will return with more details as the project gets underway, Daugherty said.

The utility will pay for the project over the next six years, and Daugherty said there isn't a lot of grant funding available for the water, versus wastewater, side of utilities.

Mark Benton, GRU's director of accounting and finance, said that utilities offering multiple services

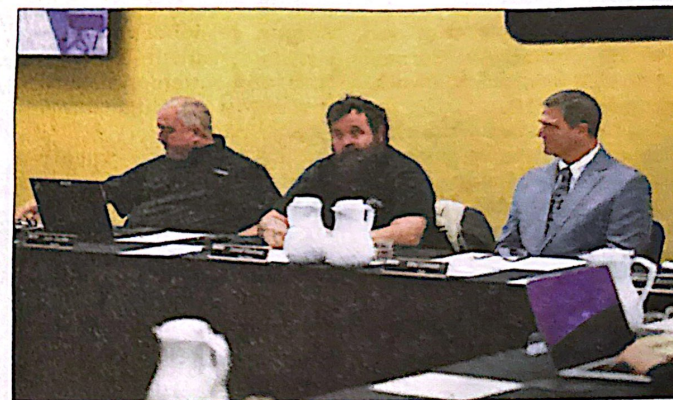


PHOTO BY SETH JOHNSON

GRU Authority Director David Haslam speaks at the board's January 2026 regular meeting.

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